Save My Game

Levels Beyond Levels

By Jason Nelson-Brown

This column provides advice for DMs whose campaigns are in trouble. Do your players constantly bicker or complain about issues both inside and outside of the main campaign action? Do your best ideas fall flat? Have you set up a situation that you now wish you hadn't? Worry no more, because Jason Nelson-Brown has the answers to save your game!

Problem: Levels Beyond Levels

Hey guys, I've been playing D&D *since 3rd edition, and I was wondering something. Our DM has managed to keep the same game going this whole time. I made my first PC in this game, and he has never died. Right now he is ranger 20/ wizard 20/ arcane archer 20/ dragon disciple 10/psion 20, which brings me to an effective 90th level PC. My question is this: With his game not ending anytime soon and me not wanting to give up my first PC, how can I continue to enjoy the game at this high level? I have other PCs in other games, but this one is special for obvious reasons.*

-- Stephen, from AskWizards.com

Wow, you guys must play a lot. I mean, I've been running a 3rd Edition game continuously since the beginning of 2002, and the highest level PC is only 22nd level. But it's all about different styles and power levels, and comparing campaigns isn't the thrust of your question. You want to know how to keep playing your super-character and how to keep it fun.

Well, you are in a challenging spot. The rules in 3rd Edition *D&D* are theoretically infinitely scalable. There is no maximum level as in the Basic *D&D* system or in *AD&D* worlds such as *Dragonlance*. There is no sharp curtailment or capping of hit points, attack bonuses, saving throws, and other character attributes as in *AD&D*. Certain rules start to get progressively more broken at high levels (especially the 'natural 1 always fails' rule, coupled with the death from massive damage rule, or the imbalance in how easy it is to increase save DCs vs. raising saving throw bonuses when you have tons of money for equipment). While failure becomes much rarer, the consequences for failure become more extreme -- you get super-extra-mega-ultra-double-killed if you fail a save at those levels.

In any case, the *Epic Level Handbook* and the section of the *Dungeon's Master's Guide* dealing with high-level adventures contain a lot of information about some of the dangers inherent in using the base rules at mega-levels without taking these types of things into account and either adjusting the rules or your style of play to compensate. The mechanics in the *Epic Level Handbook* are 3.0 and so require some tweaking if you have moved on to a 3.5 game (see the appropriate errata and FAQ files).

The tricky thing is the balance between getting to flex your 90th level muscles and be super-tough without everything being too easy. Yes, you can pick awesome locks just by looking at them, and kick in the doors to the Hall of the Fire Giant King and wipe out the entire complex in under an hour without breaking a sweat -- but after you finish hacking through 57 trolls in a row without taking a scratch, the charm kinda wears off. If your Bluff or Diplomacy is so good that everyone believes you all the time no matter what you say, the interrogation game becomes kind of boring.

At the same time, if god-killing monstrosities suddenly start popping out of the woodwork to fight you because that's your challenge level, the game feels strange as well. If you are fighting advanced versions of the same monsters you fought 30 levels ago, only now they're 30 levels tougher, too, that doesn't seem quite right. The problem is that the 'monster food chain' gets skewed at the top levels. There's no sense of progression from goblins to bugbears to ogres to minotaurs to hill giants to demons to dragons to liches to tougher dragons, to dracoliches, and on up the list. Why are all these earthshakingly powerful monsters hanging out together? Regular dungeons with CR 90 monsters replacing CR 10 monsters simply don't work.

At ultra-high level, combat can and will still happen, but probably less often than at low levels. Super-tough opponents will be legendary beings, and some of your work will be in discovering their existence, researching how to best combat them, uncovering their goals and what is needed to stop them, and then actually seeking them out and getting to where they are. Sometimes they will be legendary locations with potentially world-altering powers, such as the Icy Heart of Ghulurak in *Dungeon Master's Guide II*. The adventure is to find these lost places and make sure the forces of darkness don't get control of them. Incidental encounters along the way will either be rare or, at your level, not very difficult to overcome. As you ramp up to fight your chief nemeses, recurring villains from previous adventures probably won't stick around and fight to the death. The gods can be motivators, directors, and guides, but I advise against making god vs. person combat even possible -- you can talk with them, you can bust up their evil minions and foil their plots, and you can try to get other gods to act against them, but sticking your sword through Hades's head shouldn't get you more than a chuckle. But that's just me -- others will tell you gods are fair game for high-level PCs. That's up to your DM.

If you really want to keep playing your character and having fun, you can't just keep wandering around looking for plot hooks to go adventuring as if you're some punk just out of ranger school. You are going to need to help the DM by creating goals for your character and putting some effort into what you want to do with it. Only you and your DM can answer exactly what that will be, because only you know what you've already done. Your character is presumably the most powerful mortal on the planet (or one of them, if the whole party is 90th level). Think WWSD -- What Would Superman Do? (Or what would Darkseid or Apocalypse or Doctor Doom do, if that's what floats your boat.) Do you want to become emperor of the world? Devise a plan of conquest, figure out how to raise an army and rule the world. Do you want to eliminate the curse of vampirism or lycanthrophy? Unearth the ancient secrets of the Montesi formula kept in the forbidden tome of the Darkhold and use it to empower your master spell to annihilate them forever from the game world. Do you want to create a magitech society with all the modern conveniences of today supplied through a cadre of 'industrial mages'? Go for it. Do you want to put an end to the Blood War permanently by exterminating every demon in the Abyss? Good luck, but go ahead and try. There are only so many epic, psuedonatural barbarian/blackguard half-dragon akutenshai vampire balor paragons they can throw at you, right?

The key is to think big. At 90th level, you are the poo, and everyone needs to take a big whiff. You are a big-baller and a shot-caller. Act like it. You already have more treasure than you could ever spend on yourself (well, that's not necessarily true, since epic equipment and spell research is epecially expensive, but by the time you are 90th level, I assume you already have the best of everything), so think about putting your money to work. In addition to the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Epic Level Handbook*, check out *Power of Faerun* for ideas on how to gain power as a character in the game world -- a ruler, a religious leader, a business leader, or any of several other venues. It's designed for Forgotten Realms, but the ideas can be used anywhere. Check out the rules for 'affiliations' in *Player's Handbook II* for ideas on how to create and use groups, secret societies, and organizations in the world. Found a nation. Create your own religion, with yourself as the pope (or as the object of veneration -- declare yourself St. Me!). Buy your favorite local city and everything in it, then figure out what you want to do with it. Construct a mighty and legendary artifact. Build a great library in which to store all the world's knowledge and share it with everyone, including fighting to unearth secrets and to keep the villains from stealing knowledge and hiding it away for their own nefarious ends. Impose a universal Common language and common system of coinage for the whole world … oh, wait, *D&D* already has that.

The *D&D* boxed set rules of the 1980s adopted an interesting and logical approach to how characters would expand the horizons of possibility as they went up in levels. The Basic *D&D* set covered levels 1-3, and it was assumed that at this level, you would mostly be adventuring in dungeons close to civilization -- small, self-contained environments where the danger level was fairly predictable. The next set in the series, Expert *D&D*, took you through levels 4-14. You were now powerful enough to strike out on your own in open-ended kinds of adventuring -- traveling, exploring, and perhaps even taming the wilderness. As you reached the next stage in the Companion rules (levels 15-25), you were ready to move beyond simply exploring things to begin to master some part of the world, to become a big shot in the campaign world, establishing (or conquering) a domain and facing the challenges of rulership. The Masters rules covered levels 26-35 and dealt with extending your power into exotic locales and unusual situations in the world. It even dealt with venturing beyond the campaign world into the larger universe beyond -- the planes -- and making a name for yourself there. Pushing the boundaries of magic beyond the usual into artifacts and things of legend was within PC reach. The final set was the Immortals rules, level 36, which put you face to face with the reality that your character was no longer just a successful adventurer but stood on the threshold of being a legendary superhero or even ascending into the pantheon of divinities. By designing the system this way, they answered for you the question of "what should my character do next?" Nowadays, that choice is up to you.

About the Author

Jason Nelson-Brown lives in Seattle with his wife Kelle, daughters Meshia and Indigo, son Allen, and dog Bear. He is an active and committed born-again Christian who began playing *D&D* in 1981 and currently runs one weekly campaign while playing intermittently in two others.

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